

## Forging a Health System

More than 488,000 American Indians and Alaska Natives, living for the most part on reservations and in other remote and isolated areas, depend upon the Indian Health Service (IHS) for their total health needs. Providing health services that are comprehensive and responsive to these needs is a challenging task that calls for a concerted effort of consumer and provider alike.

Through the joint efforts of the Indian people and the Indian Health Service, all available services, staffs, and facilities are being forged into an effective health services system. The Indian people and Alaska Natives themselves are one of the most important resources within the Service's system. They represent a majority of the IHS employee staff, their tribal governments and community institutions are a major element in the management of health programs, and their tribal units are a major employer of health service workers in their respective communities. Their involvement extends from guiding health program development to coordinating and blending together multiple health resources into the IHS system. Since 1955, when the Indian Health Service was organized, the growth of Indian and Alaska Native participation in all phases of the planning, operation, and evaluation of the IHS program has been remarkable.

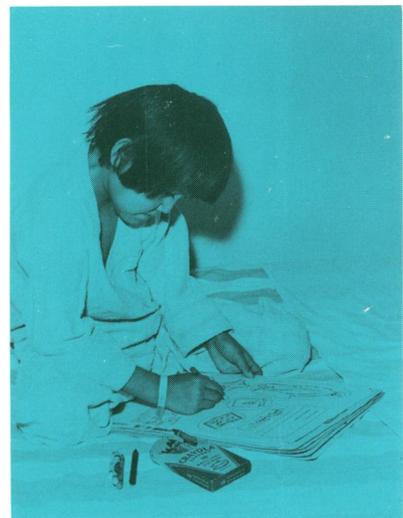
During the same period, IHS technical and facility resources and management capability have attempted to keep pace with sophisticated space-age innovations. Computerized systems for delivering health services have been developed, modern hospitals and health centers have been constructed, and new methods and techniques have been devised for effective community participation. The integration of these activities has enabled the Indian Health Service to design a total comprehensive health care program that is responsive to the individual needs of diverse groups of people.

A parallel to this growth has been a significant improvement in the health status of Indian people and Alaska Natives. Since 1955 the infant death rate has declined 62 percent, the death rate from gastritis and related diseases has declined 84 percent, the tuberculosis death rate is down 86 percent, the influenza and pneumonia death rate decreased 57 percent, and the death rate from certain diseases of early infancy declined 81 percent.

Even though we have made such substantial gains, much remains to be done before we reach our goal of elevating the health status of Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest possible level. By almost any accepted health index, the health of these people is still far below national standards, and their health needs significantly exceed those of the general population. Our health resources are limited, and in many communities available facilities and manpower—even though developed to near maximum potential—are still grossly inadequate. These and other deficiencies need to be identified and all existing resources—both governmental and private—put into motion for a total coordinated health effort. The challenge continues.

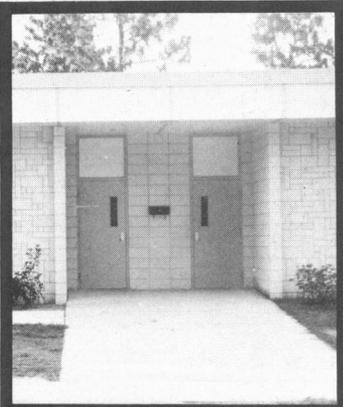
We are confident, however, of the future and of a diminishing challenge as all available resources are forged into a system of mutual interaction and maximum performance.—DR. EMERY A. JOHNSON, *Director, Indian Health Service.*

*Cover:* Indian child in the pediatrics ward of an Indian Health Service Hospital symbolizes the special Indian health section that opens this issue of the journal. Seven papers and a selected bibliography reflect recent achievements and continuing challenges in the delivery of health care to the first Americans.



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